



Keeping well at Christmas

This guide was made to support your mental
health during the festive season



MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS

BESPOKE SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR YOUR WORKPLACE OR COMMUNITY GROUP

WHO ARE WE?

We are a registered charity and have been supporting people across the North of England for over 20 years. We are well-known for being pioneers in providing and developing advocacy services and spearheading mental health and wellbeing initiatives in our community. We are not just accredited trainers, but one of the leading experts in advocacy and mental health.

WHY WORK WITH US?

For the past three years we have been awarded 'Gold' by Mind in their Workplace Wellbeing Index Awards. In 2022 and 2023, we ranked first out of 119 organisations evidencing our commitment to supporting our teams' mental health and wellbeing. We have the expertise to support you to champion mental health and wellbeing. It's our bread and butter; we understand people, we support people and we are passionate about helping you do the same.



TRUSTED AND ASSURED



EXPERTS IN MENTAL HEALTH



INTERACTIVE AND ENGAGING



BESPOKE AND TAILORED

Joyful but... stressful?

Although for many of us the holidays are a time to relax, have fun, and spend time with family and friends, the festive season can also be a stressful and challenging time. The financial pressures, rushing to the shops in the traffic, juggling your time between family members and friends, and often leaving little time to ourselves. This can be an overwhelming time of the year.

With so many of us struggling during this time, the team at Advocacy Focus wanted to put together this guide to help you stay safe and well during the festive period. This guide will help you with:

- Anxiety and stress
- Eating disorders
- Financial health
- Self-care and mindfulness

Samaritans - 116 123

Find a local GP
<https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-gp>

Richmond Fellowship
<https://www.richmondfellowship.org.uk/support-we-offer/find-support/>

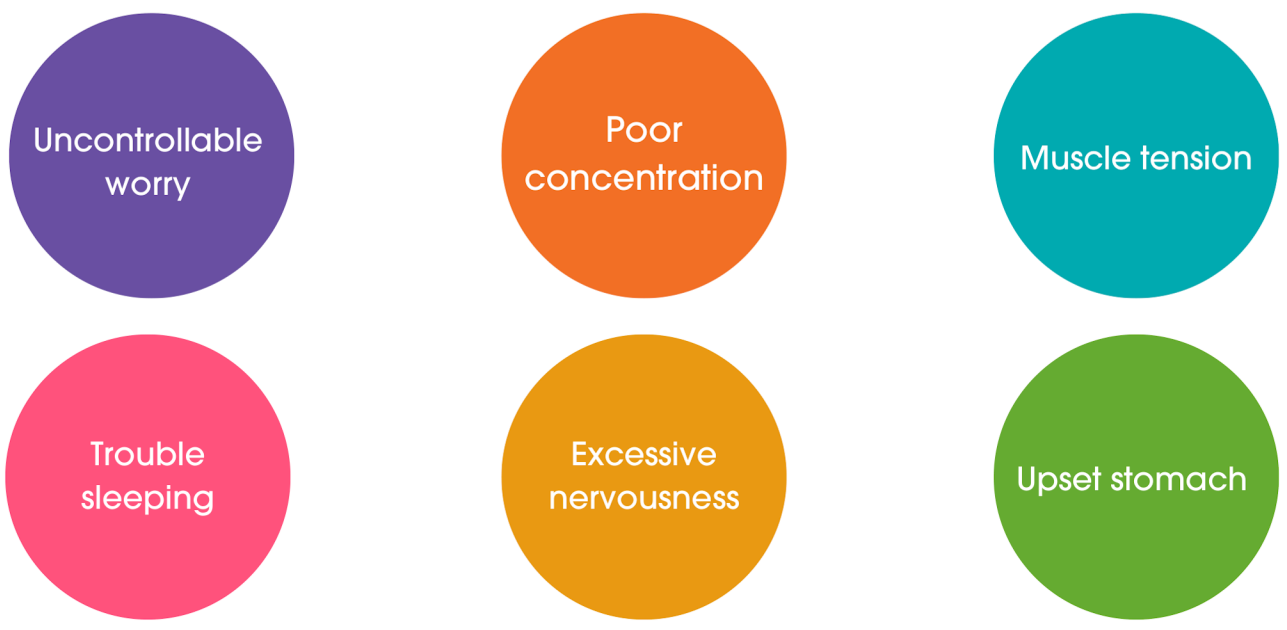
Breathe Therapies
<https://www.breathetherapies.co.uk/breathe-therapies-contact/>



Anxiety

Anxiety is a mental and physical reaction to perceived threats. In small doses, anxiety is helpful; it protects us from danger and focuses our attention on problems. But when anxiety is too severe or occurs too often, it can become debilitating.

Symptoms of anxiety



What is anxiety like for you? How does it make you feel?

My thoughts and emotions	My physical symptoms

Identifying the signs of stress

Difficulty concentrating

Mood swings or changes in mood

Feelings of being overwhelmed

Feelings of constant worry or anxiety

Irritability or having a short temper

Difficulty relaxing

Depression

Low self-esteem

Eating more or less than usual

Changes in sleeping habits

Using alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs to relax

Aches, pains, and/or muscle tension

Diarrhoea

Feelings of nausea or dizziness

Loss of libido

If you experience symptoms for a prolonged period of time and feel they are affecting your everyday life or making you feel unwell please speak to your GP. There are lots of treatment options available.



My triggers

What situations cause you to feel anxious and/or stressed? These could be called your 'triggers'. They can be anything from specific events to interactions with certain individuals, but sometimes we don't know what our triggers are and that is ok. Use the thought bubbles below to help you identify your triggers.



If you experience symptoms for a prolonged period of time and feel they are affecting your everyday life or making you feel unwell please speak to your GP. There are lots of treatment options available.

Eating disorders

When you have an eating disorder, the most wonderful time of the year can also be one of the most challenging. With a relentless focus on food and all the associated difficulties, this can be a difficult time to manage behaviours and maintain your recovery. James Downs, an eating disorder mental health campaigner (*pictured to the right*), writes about his experience living with an eating disorder during this time of year:



"[...] It's so important to remember the essence of Christmas is connection, and the people who love and care about you would not want you to struggle alone. Taking time with friends and family beforehand to have conversations about what you need over the Christmas period can make the world of difference. **Giving myself permission to take up space and talk about my concerns has been one of the greatest gifts I have given myself in recovery.** [...] For me, really practical things like doing the washing up after Christmas dinner to help distract me from food-related anxiety and give me headspace from my family can be really important. For others, it might be about having permission to eat at all. No one eating disorder is the same as another, and nor is any family. **If people you see at Christmas make insensitive comments, remember it is OK to feel upset about this. If you feel lonely and isolated at Christmas, that is valid too.**

It is normal to find Christmas challenging with an eating disorder, for so many reasons, and that is not your fault. Even when I feel like I am failing, I always tell myself that I am doing the best I can with the resources that are available to me, and none of us would choose to struggle with food and eating if we could help it. **However lonely and isolating an eating disorder can be at any time of year, we are not alone, either, and if Christmas is about anything, it's about love, compassion, kindness and connection.** However much we might stumble, struggle or even succeed as we navigate the festive period this year, there are sources of support such as Beat to turn to, and strategies we can use to try and make it even 1% easier.

As much as people like you and I may struggle - especially so at Christmas - **we are worthy of support, love and care, too.** I hope you can join me in trying to make our Christmases as easy as they can be, even if we can't do it alone."



My coping mechanisms

How are you currently coping with your anxiety, stress, and/or eating disorder? Is there anything you'd like to do, but aren't doing right now? Is there anything you're doing that may not be helping? Use the table below to reflect on your coping mechanisms.

Positive coping mechanisms	Negative coping mechanisms
<i>10-minute mindfulness session each morning</i>	<i>Drinking alcohol when I feel anxious</i>



Why not give the gift of support, and send this booklet to a loved one?

Financial health

This time of year can be incredibly strenuous on our finances. Work dos, meals out with friends, Secret Santas, gifts for the family... It's a lot! On top of this, we are dealing with rising bills and food costs, so it is only normal we will feel the squeeze. But let's not forget, Christmas isn't about spending money - it's about spending time with our loved ones.

Top tips for a financially healthy Christmas

- Make a list of whom you'd like to give a gift to this year, and write down a budget for each person
- You may have amazing gift ideas in mind, but would the person want that gift knowing it put you in debt?
- Could you suggest a Secret Santa so everyone only has to buy one gift?

Use apps like Vinted to find affordable gifts

Complete surveys online for vouchers

Set a gift budget with your friends and family

Save up your supermarket points to use on your Christmas shop

Gift homemade items

Give the gift of time - offer to baby sit for a friend or cook a family member a meal

Invite friends to your home instead of going out for a meal

Most services offer referral schemes, sign up your family and friends and get rewarded

There is a lot of financial support out there. We have included below some of our team's favourite websites and apps.

[Money Saving Expert Budget Planning](#)

[Mental Health and Money Advice](#)

[Turn2Us Benefits Calculator](#)

[TopCashBack](#)



Self-care



PLAY TIME

Sit back, relax and do something you enjoy. Being creative and allowing time to just 'play' helps the brain make new connections.



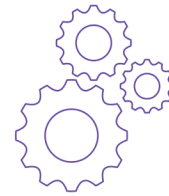
DOWN TIME

Let your mind wander. Don't think about any particular goal. It helps the brain recharge.



Mindful time

Shhhh. Quiet thoughts help your brain and body connect. Focus on sensations, thoughts and feelings.



CONNECTING TIME

Connecting with others - in person where possible and not via a screen! - as well as stopping to connect with the natural world (literally stopping to smell the roses).



PHYSICAL TIME

Get up and get moving. It strengthens the body, including the brain.



SLEEP TIME

Get your zzzzzs! Sleep allows the brain to recover from the day's experiences.



FOCUS TIME

Closely focus on a task or goal. This challenge makes deep connections in the brain.



Relaxation and grounding techniques

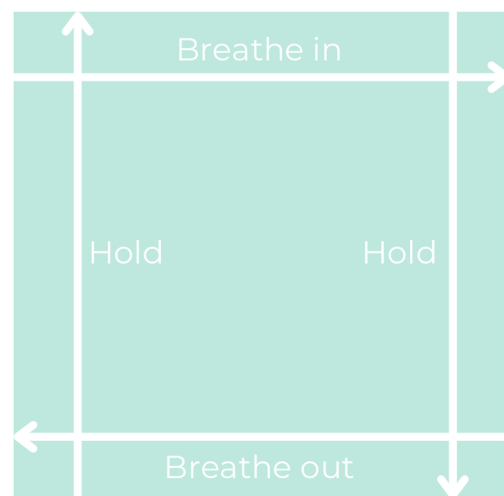
- Close your eyes and count backward from 10
- Clench and relax different parts of your body, starting with your feet and working your way up

Square breathing

- Breathe in for 4 seconds and hold for 4 seconds.
- Breathe out for 4 seconds and hold for 4 seconds.

As you breathe, imagine your breath filling the square. Repeat as many times as you need until you feel calmer.

With time you may be able to increase the timings of this exercise, doing six seconds or even longer.



Listen to music

Listening to music can help you relax, especially when you use ear/headphones. You can use terms like 'relaxing music', 'REM sounds for sleep' or 'happy songs' to find great playlists.

Grounding

- Use your senses: name to yourself 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch (and touch them), 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste. Take your time working through this.
- Use your voice: pick up a book or magazine and read a paragraph out loud.
- If you're feeling 'stuck', change how you are positioned. Wiggle your fingers, tap your feet, pay attention to how that movement feels. You are in control of your body right here and right now.



OUR RESOURCES

At Advocacy Focus we pride ourselves on creating self-help resources which are not only useful and practical but also accessible. Our Advocates and Wellbeing Champions have created a wide range of leaflets, booklets and virtual training to help you on your journey to better mental health.

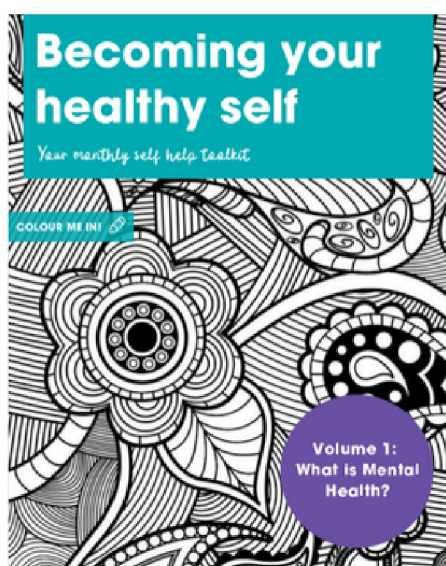


Advocacy Friends

advocacy
focus



Self Advocacy Toolkit



Becoming Your Healthy Self



FocusAF